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FM AMEMBASSY ASHGABAT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 1822
INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE
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RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC
RHMFIUU/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 2150
RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA 4473
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 2285
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL 2721
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 3039
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ASHGABAT 001470

SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

STATE FOR SCA/CEN, SCA/PPD, IIP, DRL

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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: U.S. ELECTION EXCITEMENT IN THE MORNING FAILS TO MAKE THE EVENING NEWS

¶11. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

¶12. (SBU) SUMMARY: On the morning of November 5, Post hosted a well-attended U.S. election reception. Due to the time difference, attendees were able to track election results as polling stations closed across the United States. Presentations on overseas voting and the Electoral College, displays on democratic themes and a mock election all reinforced the informational impact of the event. Despite the presence of Turkmen TV cameras filming the event, the evening broadcast included no mention of this historic election. END SUMMARY.

GENUINE ELECTION EXCITEMENT

¶13. (SBU) Starting at 7:00 a.m. on Wednesday, November 5, local and diplomatic invitees came to the Public Affairs Section (PAS)-organized reception to watch election results. Among the 200 plus guests, Turkmen government turnout was low, due to President Berdimuhamedov's departure for South Korea the same day. However, several mid-level MFA representatives were present. Other attendees included the diplomatic corps, NGO reps, USG program alumni, as well as a large number of private American Citizens. A large number of guests stayed for two or three hours, with many remaining through Obama's victory speech.

¶14. (SBU) In a hotel banquet hall, guests were treated to multimedia election information and live coverage via satellite television and the Internet. IIP-produced election materials were available, including DVD copies of campaign videos with Turkmen subtitles, were available for distribution. Poster shows on Democracy and the Women's Suffrage movement were on display in the lobby just in front of the banquet hall. Video bios of both candidates were playing on TVs at the event, accompanied by cardboard cutouts of each candidate. On stage were large projection screens of CNN International and a live Internet Electoral College map. Conoff and PAO gave presentations on overseas voting and the Electoral College system, respectively. The crowd and the multimedia displays gave the event a real election party feel.

HUSHED INTEREST, FOLLOWING THE RESULTS

¶15. (SBU) Minutes after the presentation on the Electoral College and the 270 electoral votes needed to win, CNN projected Senator Obama as the winner to applause and cheers. Within minutes, Post's

Charge d'Affaires, an African-American, delivered moving and highly personal remarks about the evolution of American democracy during her lifetime, culminating in the election of Obama. Guests listened with hushed interest and some cried.

MOCK ELECTION RESULTS ALSO GENERATE EXCITEMENT

¶15. (SBU) The diplomatic corps and local citizens participated in a mock election. Many "voters" freely wore their "I voted" stickers. Although the Obama and McCain buttons provided were taken by many visitors, only a few were brave enough to show open support for either candidate through wearing a button. One USG program alumnus wore both candidates' buttons. Many guests were thrilled with the option of voting, even if their votes did not count.

¶16. (SBU) The mock-election result (Obama 48 to McCain 8) was announced sometime after CNN projected the real result. The announcement was immediately followed by a drop of balloons, "Stars and Stripes Forever," and guests clapping to the rhythm.

POSITIVE REACTIONS TO THE OBAMA VICTORY

¶17. (SBU) Many locals were surprised and delighted by the news of the Obama victory. Many expressed that they had been pessimistic about his chances of actually winning. Some expressed approval with the new direction and new image of the United States. Many USG alumni were particularly happy with Obama's victory. One noted that Obama will better represent the U.S. to the world. One diplomat noted that Obama's election would mark an improved step for the U.S., but now the world will see if he can live up to the expectations. One western ambassador remarked that Obama's victory was a "symbol to the world" of the possibility of real democracy.

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STATE MEDIA PRESENT

¶18. (SBU) TV crews from the evening "Watan" news program and the Turkmenistan Channel both covered the event. Also in attendance were international stringers and state print media journalists. One state journalist quietly but boldly told PAO, "I wish we could vote for change," - very uncharacteristic for a state employee. TV cameras interviewed Embassy staff and private American citizens about the election. One crew also filmed private Americans who cheered or were tearful about the Obama victory.

BREAD AND BUTTER "ISSUES" COVERED IN THE NEWS

¶19. (SBU) Disappointingly, Wednesday night's evening broadcast made no mention of the U.S. elections or the embassy's event. Instead the main "news" items were the lead story on President Berdimuhamedov's departure to Korea (as expected), a story on Turkmen wheat processing (ending with unexciting video of a bread delivery truck unloading bread), and a story showing the mass production of "President" brand butter. Also surprising: there was no mention of the election in the state newspapers on Thursday morning. (NOTE: Watan newspaper had previously run a few short paragraph-length articles on the U.S. campaign in the last few months. END NOTE.)

¶110. (SBU) COMMENT: The Wednesday morning event was well received and had the feel of a genuine American election party. All guests seemed to enjoy the excitement of learning the outcome. Many spoke in positive terms about American democracy and the potential of President-elect Barack Obama. Post is disappointed, however, that State media has so far ignored an historic American election, despite their attendance at this event and that one newspaper had even run some simple coverage of the election campaign previously. END COMMENT.

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